

*This chapter is dedicated to the elimination
of violence in youth sports.*



The basic principles of sportsmanship are straightforward. First, treat those with whom you play and compete against as you'd like to be treated. Second, win or lose, demonstrate respect for yourself, your teammates, your opponents and the coaches on both sides of the field as well as the referees, judges and other officials.

As simple as it sounds, anyone who has been exposed to youth sports has probably witnessed or heard stories of over-competitive coaches and the over-the-top way in which some parents behave while attending youth sporting events. Sadly, society has created a highly charged and enormously competitive sports culture in which children are being pressured to perform beyond what's reasonable.

MISCONDUCT DISCOURAGES SPORTS PARTICIPATION

The phenomenon of misconduct at youth sporting events was brought to the attention of the nation in July of 2000 when a Massachusetts man had a fight with another parent at their sons' youth hockey game and the altercation turned fatal.

What affect does this behavior have on young athletes? Many are merely embarrassed by well-intentioned parents who

act out or bark orders from the sidelines; others cannot take the pressure or humiliation and decide to quit, often replacing sports with undesirable behaviors.

The statistics are staggering. Of the 25 million youths currently playing organized sports, only 7.5 million will still be playing by the time that they reach the age of 13. Nearly 50% of youths who were surveyed say that they've been called names, yelled at or insulted while participating in sports and close to 18% say that they've been hit, kicked or slapped while participating in sports. More than 20% of young athletes say that they were pressured to play with an injury and 8.2% report that they were pressured to intentionally harm others while playing sports. Equally as disturbing is the fact that the nation's 19,000 sports officials are now routinely offered assault insurance.

It's important for parents to realize that when their behavior has affected their children's interest in sports and the personal security of officials, many of whom are volunteers, it's time to rethink the cultural messages that are sent about what is and what is not appropriate behavior at sporting events. And parents need to ask themselves why there has been such a serious cultural shift.

THE VALUE OF WINNING

There are many reasons why people act inappropriately at youth sporting events.

Chapter 20

Rediscovering Youth Sportsmanship

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Basically, it comes down to the value that our culture places on winning, and the way in which parents can get caught up in their children's activities in a manner that's unhealthy for the children and everyone else involved.

With this as a backdrop, somewhere along the line, the ideals about what youth sports are supposed to offer children have been corrupted. The outcome presents itself in many forms. Often, there's too much pressure on children from parents or other adults. There are adults who simply cannot let kids be kids. As a result, our society has developed a "win-at-all-cost" mentality.

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

What's at the heart of this win-at-all-cost mentality? Although the root cause is debatable, what's not is the fact that when adults have unrealistic expectations and don't understand what they can reasonably expect from a young athlete, frustration, disappointment and even violence follow.

What parents often fail to realize is that youth sports isn't about them; it's about the children. The better the understanding that parents and coaches have about what can reasonably be expected of young athletes at different ages, the better equipped they'll be to provide the support system that children need to stay in sports and reap its benefits, building self esteem, developing physical

fitness, learning about teamwork and, perhaps most importantly, having fun.

DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF YOUNG ATHLETES

When the physical growth and development of children are discussed, it's with the understanding that this knowledge is a necessary part of supporting and encouraging a child to make positive strides in youth sports. If parents know what their children are and are not capable of doing strictly from an age-appropriate developmental sense, they're more likely to engage in behavior that will support and encourage that development. If parents go into each game knowing, for example, that their six-year-old is incapable of strategizing and scheming for the next play, they'll be less likely to become frustrated with their child, the officials and even themselves.

No matter how well your child plays, there are specific stages that are a normal part of development. All children and teenagers grow on a fairly predictable timetable and physical growth and development occur in a sequence according to the age of the child. Within each age group, physical growth and development is unique. As they move through youth sports, children build on the developmental strengths from previous stages.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

It's important for all adults to understand that, regardless of their age, children watch and learn from everything that adults do and the ways that adults handle themselves in challenging situations. If adults act out and show disrespect, they're teaching children that this behavior is appropriate and thus continuing the cycle of misconduct that's already having an adverse effect on sports in America.

The following sections provide an overview of the key physical, emotional, mental and social developmental stages for several different age groups as well as actions that parents and coaches can take to support young athletes and encourage their growth.

The Six to 12-Year-Old Athlete

There's a wide range of development throughout middle to late childhood (ages six to 12). During this developmental stage, mastering new skills is a key element. Therefore, the focus is on learning fundamental skills such as passing, handling equipment, and learning to play positions. Throughout their early ages, children develop at widely varying rates and will demonstrate varying degrees of skill in all areas.

During this period, growth is fairly steady. There are small but substantial differences in a child's strength. In addition, basic motor skills seem to approach a mature pattern.

There's also an increase in the flexibility of young athletes. However, they are only able to perform in short bursts of low to moderate intensity. This becomes important in activities that need explosive power such as ice hockey, which requires skating fast and shooting a puck.

This stage is the foundation for future development that can help build a child's sense of self esteem and a true love of sports.

Supporting the Six to 12-Year-Old Athlete

Knowing some of these developmental milestones, how can parents best encourage a six to 12-year-old athlete? For one thing, parents can teach fairness and not criticize coaches or officials. Parents should help their children set individual goals that are realistic. Remember, too, that this is a time for player development. Because of the diverse skill level among athletes, competitive sports at this age are difficult. Understand that it is not unusual for some children to develop less quickly than others. It's better to praise the effort, energy and enthusiasm that a child has for the sport than to focus on winning.

Children should concentrate, therefore, on mastering the physical requirements of the sport as well as the socialization requirements of playing with others. Young athletes also need to focus on rules, understand boundaries and recognize authority.





With younger children, game play should engage them in the sport and create an interest. As their skill levels increase, children may be interested in joining competitive leagues. Parents are cautioned that if children participate at a level that's too far above their ability, they may become frustrated, lose interest and fail to master skills.

This is a critical time for parents; remember that barking orders from the sidelines or shouting at children will never improve their skills; it will only make them feel as if they've failed. Instead, use the challenge as an opportunity for children to understand that everyone has limits and this is something that they will need to work to overcome.

Hero worship is also common among this age group. Be sure that your child has a good professional sports role model to follow. Additionally, discuss what makes a player a good sport (or a poor one) during televised or live professional games when a child can see the athlete in action.

The 13 to 15-Year-Old Athlete

The 13 to 15-year-old athlete is developmentally unique, too. The early years of puberty bring hormonal and biochemical changes along with psychological changes and an emergence from childhood. The greatest increases in muscle mass, muscular strength and cardiopulmonary endurance occur during

these ages, but there are decreases in flexibility. Because the start of puberty can vary, there are wide differences in size, strength and skill within this age group. Bigger players have a size and strength advantage while smaller players often excel in skills that require finesse and agility.

During puberty, boys experience a dramatic acceleration of muscular strength with a growth spurt occurring at around the age of 14. This results in a considerable increase in performance in sports that require speed, power and quickness. Children in this stage of development are prone to injury, especially around the knees.

In this age group, children tend to move away from parental control and toward peer influence. They won't be as compliant as they used to be at younger ages and may be less interested in parental approval and more interested in peer approval.

Supporting the 13 to 15-Year-Old Athlete

The best advice here is not to push them too hard. This is a time for early independence, and that image of being independent is everything to the adolescent. Parents who scream or call attention to themselves are seen as embarrassing.

Furthermore, don't be overly critical. Remember that to stay with the game a child needs encouragement, not criticism. Reassure children who are developmentally immature

that they will catch up to their peers and reinforce earlier skill training. Parents should also encourage participation in sports camps to assist in overcoming weak areas.

The 16 to 20-Year-Old Athlete

As a youngster matures into a young adult, the role of parents becomes more complex. Parents will be called upon to support and encourage teenagers but also to provide the freedom that's so crucial to their self esteem and sense of control over their lives.

During this stage of development, males reach skeletal maturity by about the age of 17 and continue to increase in size, strength and speed. However, the rate of increase isn't as great as in the previous stage.

Supporting the 16 to 20-Year-Old Athlete

Parents should realize that long gone are the days that their children's involvement in sports is predicated by a strong parental desire. This is a critical period that will determine whether a young athlete will remain active in sports into young adulthood. Generally speaking, children who have remained in sports or in a specific sport up to this age are involved for a variety of self-motivating reasons, including the love of competition, the pure enjoyment of sport, the desire to be physically fit, and the means to reduce stress. In addition, they've formed a social identification with their teammates.

Parents also need to respect the fact that

their children's lives are changing and that they may begin to become preoccupied with other areas such as work, school, their future, and social/romantic relationships. Physically, children who mature late should be reassured that they will catch up with their teammates by the end of this stage. Keep in mind, though, that some functional differences may continue beyond this period.

What Does This Mean for Parents?

No matter what the age or developmental stage of a child, the question that all parents should ask is this: "How can I optimize my child's development during the many stages of growth?"

First, accept the developmental timeline of your child and understand that development is sequential; you can't rush the stages as they happen naturally. Parents shouldn't draw attention to their child's awkwardness during any developmental stage but be patient with clumsiness and some unpleasant habits that they may exhibit. Also, parents should never pressure children to perform beyond their capacity. It's counterproductive at best and dangerous at worst.

Remember that athletes need to develop an interest in a sport before they can truly compete and that criticism diminishes their interest in playing; support enhances it. Criticism should be constructive or not given at all. Criticism should be used to help an athlete identify limitations and focus on





strengths. Praise what they do right. Because there's a wide range of growth and maturation during the early adolescent years, it's important to identify the strengths of less mature players.

Maybe most importantly, though, remember that young athletes are modeling your behavior — good and bad.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict is a natural part of life brought on by different beliefs, experiences and values. If not managed carefully, however, conflict can harm relationships and, as is seen too often in youth sports, lead to inappropriate behavior. Conflict is neither good nor bad. What makes it good or bad is a parent's response to it.

Addressing conflict at sporting events is a difficult issue. Many parents have seen or been in situations that they have labeled as uncomfortable and not within bounds of good sportsmanship. And many parents have gotten angry about something as it relates to their child's participation in sports. Maybe it was another parent's reaction to the game, your child's performance, the referee's calls, the coach's decisions or another athlete's behavior or performance.

No matter the situation in which parents find themselves, how they deal with these feelings of anger is key to choosing an appropriate response to a conflict situation

and preventing it from escalating into something harmful to them and their children, and interfering with the fun of the game.

Responses to Conflict

How parents respond to conflict really depends on their skills in handling conflict and their basic beliefs about resolving it. There are three main responses to conflict: avoidance, confrontation and communication.

A parent who's an avoider will give in, retreat or walk away. People who are more confrontational will use their power to win. They will respond by using their anger, make threats and act aggressively with potentially violent behavior.

The healthiest way to resolve conflict is through communication. Parents should use their communication skills to control angry responses and recognize that they can control their negative reactions by first communicating with themselves and diffusing their own anger.

Diffusing Your Anger

If you notice yourself getting angry, there are several steps that you can take to look at the situation objectively and identify the real reason for your anger with the goal of diffusing the anger and remaining in control.

First, look at your perception of the situation. Do you perceive all of the

information correctly? Second, assess the situation and be honest with yourself about what's truly behind your anger. Next, evaluate your options and what's best for yourself and your child. Last, decide on the best course of action. Do you remain in control and try to communicate your anger? Or do you lash out with words or actions? Again, this decision should be based on the best interests of your child.

De-Escalating Anger in Others

When someone approaches you in anger, you can de-escalate the situation by using several simple steps known as CALM:

- **Calm yourself.** Demonstrate your desire to understand the angry person by restating what was said such as “I see that you’re angry about the coach’s decision. Why don’t you tell me about your concerns.” Don’t get defensive. Suspend your judgment and commit yourself to calming the other person.
- **Acknowledge what the other person is saying** and ask them to tell you more about the situation while showing concern for their needs. For example, “Yes, Mr. Smith, I agree that it isn’t fair that my child played the entire game while your son hasn’t had any time on the field.”
- **Listen actively** by making eye contact and not interrupting.

- **Make sure that you understand what’s being said.** You might say, “So, Mr. Smith, I hear you saying that you’d prefer that all of the children get equal time on the field, no matter what their skill level. Let’s talk to the coach after the game about that issue.”

SANCTIONS

Not everyone has the skills to de-escalate anger in themselves or in others and not all situations can be handled easily by a parent, coach or spectator. As such, many youth sports teams are developing a series of sanctions (or consequences) for spectator and parental behavior that’s deemed inappropriate or unacceptable.

Sanctions can be used to maintain order and ensure a safe, healthy and respectful environment for the enjoyment of youth sports. They are a necessary part of creating the structure that will help control unruly and disruptive behavior that interferes with league play and creates the potential for violence.

Why Are Sanctions Important?

Similar to penalties in a sport, sanctions support the rules of engagement. In addition to serving as a reminder of what’s appropriate behavior, sanctions will make a sport a more positive experience for all children and parents.

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Most leagues develop sanctions based on what's allowed according to their bylaws and what they can easily police and enforce throughout the season. Sanctions commonly used in youth sports include those for behavior that happens before, during and after an event. For instance, physically abusive behavior during a game may lead to ejection from the event; suspension from all practices, games and team functions for the remainder of the season; and, at the referee's discretion, a minor or major penalty may be applied to the bench associated with the offending party. Some leagues also require that the offender attend an approved anger management program for reinstatement the next season.

In addition, sanctions may be given to spectators who dispense verbal abuse, throw debris or enter the field during an event. For a first offense, consequences may include being ejected from the venue and placed on probation for the season. Also, a minor or major penalty may be applied to the bench. For a second offense, leagues may add a two week suspension from attending games. For a third offense, parents or spectators are often suspended for the remainder of the season.

Pledge Your Support

It's up to each parent who is involved in youth sports to do his or her part to be a good role model and help make sports a safe

haven for kids as well as a fun experience for all. A parent's commitment should include showing respect and positive support for coaches, officials, other spectators and all players prior to, during and after the game and ensuring that your child is also taught to behave in a sportsmanlike manner. Parents must be mindful of the need for player development over the need to win and understand that their role is to provide support, not to openly instruct during the game or openly interpret the rules. Set a good example by abiding by the rulings of the officials, coaches and league administrators during and after the game.

Finally, parents should insist that their children play in a safe and healthy environment and that they don't use performance-enhancing drugs.

REFERENCE

Cole, P. 2000. Kids' sports turn deadly serious: the fatal beating of a dad at a hockey rink points to more parental violence at youth games, experts say. Chicago Tribune (July 17), N edition: 1.

RESOURCES

The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports of Michigan State University
Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission
National Alliance for Youth Sports

